Beret Puzzle Parts Falling Into Place

By Jack Anderson

The missing pieces are beginning to fall into place in the Green Beret murder mystery. The puzzle is not that a Vietnamese double agent was knocked off but that the Americans did their own dirty work. In other cases, the South Vietnamese have been the triggermen.

Allied security and special forces, including the Green Berets, carry wanted lists of Vietcong agents. The names are carefully culled from captured documents, prisoner interrogations and other intelligence sources.

Any agents who are picked up, however, are supposed to be turned over to the South Vietnamese. Usually, they are charged with treason and brought before the South Vietnamese courts. A number have beaten the rap and have been released for lack of evidence.

However, some agents are considered too dangerous to trust to the judicial processes and are secretly marked for elimination. The executions are carried out quietly by the South Vietnamese, but their American accomplices would be held guilty in any U.S. court of accessory to murder.

The South Vietnamese tended to be a little indiscriminated in carrying out these executions. Some have tried to settle old grudges by planting the names of their personal enemies on the execution list. The Americans, at least, have done their best to discourage this and to be more selective in choosing who should be "eliminated."

Ruthless Communists

The South Vietnamese aren't as ruthless, it should be added, as the Communists who have been systematically torturing, terrorizing and murdering government sympathizers for years. As fast as the North Vietnamese seized a neighborhood in the battle for Hue, for instance, Communist execution squads went from door to door with clipboards checking off the names of those selected for execution.

Unlike the allies who consider it necessary to kill only key enemy agents, the Communists have slaughtered the entire families of government sympathizers. The number brutally murdered in Hue—some buried alive in mass graves—is now figured at 3,000.

The Communists have found murder an effective method of eliminating opposition and controlling the countryside. Finally last year General Creighton Abrams, the American commander in Vietnam, decided to adopt the enemy's own tactics, in part, to combat the infiltrators, agitators and agents who form the Communist infrastructure inside South Vietnam.

He organized "Operation Phoenix," which has been efefctive in detecting fifth columnists and destroying their underground apparatus. This has severely handicapped the North Vietnamese in their attempts to mount another Tet-like offensive against South Vietnam's cities.

American Advisers

The Americans have acted merely as advisers to the South Vietnamese who have moved in to make actual arrests and upon occasion, to eliminate a dangerous agent without the nicety of a trial.

It was only the direct involvement of Americans that made the alleged Green Beret killing unique. What happened, according to intelligence sources, is that a Vietnamese agent named Chu Ven Thai Khac was caught selling out the Americans.

He belonged to an intelligence ring that was founded by the Central Intelligence Agency through an import-export front. All the while, he was a double agent for the North Vietnamese and passed on intelligence about the "gray ghosts" who watch the infiltration routes and spy on North Vietnamese troop movements on both sides of the Laotian and Cambodian borders.

Khac's treachery brought detection and death to a numberof "gray ghosts," who take their nickname from the gray clothes they wear on their daring intelligence patrols. Khac was incriminated when the Green Berets got hold of some captured photographs showing him talking to North Vietnamese intelligence agents.

The Green Berets asked the CIA what they should do with Khac and got back an oral suggestion that they get rid of him. It was stressed that the recommendation was strictly unofficial.

Possibly, the CIA expected the Green Berets to turn Khac over to the South Vietnamese for quiet disposal in the accustomed manner. Khac, however, had been working with a spy ring that operated right in the presidential palace. The Green Berets may have been apprehensive because of a personal, awkward relationship with South Vietnam's President Thieu. When the CIA learned from additional conversations that the Green Berets intended to handle the execution themselves, the "unofficial" suggestion was hastily rescinded. But it came too late; Khac had already been disposed of.

Under the army's unwritten rules, it's permissible to be an accessory to the murder of enemy agents, apparently, but it's a crime to participate directly in an execution.

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